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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter

Jonathan Marc Gribetz

Princeton University Press, 2014, 312 pages, £24.95, Hardcover

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“Race,” argues Jonathan Gribetz in the concluding chapter of *Defining Neighbors: Race, Religion, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter*, “permitted, in the minds of some, a marked flexibility in the boundaries of nationhood” in late Ottoman Palestine. In the final two decades of Ottoman administration, self-professed nationalists from both the Jewish-Zionist and the Arab communities used the concept of race to unite disparate members of each community across religious lines to serve national ends. At the heart of the intellectuals’ understandings of newly-developing nationalisms within both communities, Gribetz argues throughout the book, were the ways in which Zionists and Arab Muslims and Christians alike perceived ‘race’. Extensively researched in several languages including Hebrew, Arabic, French and Ottoman Turkish, *Defining Neighbors* largely relies upon an analysis of textual encounters between Zionist and non-Zionist Jews, Arab Muslims, and Arab Christians to historicise the subtle and overt ways that the interplay of religion and race contributed to the rise of Zionism and Arab nationalism. The setting for these textual encounters—in periodicals, published monographs, unpublished manuscripts and commentary on religious texts—is firmly within the imperial context in the final years of Ottoman control over the Arab provinces of the Levant.

Gribetz’s approach to the study of relations between the Jewish Ottoman and Jewish immigrant communities, and the (largely) Arab Ottoman population of Palestine is a refreshing one, and part of a wider trend by historians of the pre-First World War Ottoman Empire to nuance the history of that territory’s residents prior to the rupture that occurred after the war ended in 1918. The main thesis of the book is that intellectuals of both Arab and Jewish descent in Palestine interpreted each other and the actions of each other in terms of race and religion. At the same time, each side knew of the developing nationalism of the other; however, each constructed notions of race that were historically contingent on the fin de siècle Ottoman context and on the wider rise of race-thinking after the 1908 Young Turk coup. The latter was only possible through the acknowledgment by Ottoman and Egyptian intellectual elites of the ideology on race in the European context. Indeed as Gribetz notes in Chapter One, the local, regional, imperial, and global spheres must each be considered in order for historians to understand the processes which contributed to the socially-constructed category of ‘race’ and more specifically, the Semitic race, in imperial Palestine.

The book is framed by a 1909 encounter in Jerusalem between two old friends, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (a newspaper editor and a long-term resident of Palestine, born in Lithuania) and Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi (an Ottoman parliamentarian from the established al-Khalidi family

of Jerusalem). Ben-Yehuda interviewed al-Khalidi for the former's Hebrew-language newspaper, and their conversation delved into al-Khalidi's rejection of Zionist colonies as well as the aims of Jewish nationalism in Palestine. These men framed their discussion of Zionism both in the interview and in their individual writings within their understanding of ancient-to-modern Jewish history. One of al-Khalidi's own unpublished works on the definition of Zionism and its ideology, under analysis by Gribetz, sets the standard for a general Arab intellectual understanding of Jewish nationalism and the intent of the Zionist movement in Palestine. Al-Khalidi's understanding of Jewish history comes from an understanding of the Jewish and the Muslim communities in religious terms and he firmly sets Judaism as different from Islam and Christianity.

Meanwhile, through his study of Hebrew editors and intellectuals in Palestine, Gribetz argues that Jewish immigrant Zionists and longer-standing Ottoman Jewish Zionists struggled with questions of what it meant for one to be an Arab, a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew or a 'Hebrew'. The self-perception of the literate, educated Zionists was often linked to how they imagined and defined their Ottoman Arab neighbors and counterparts. Gribetz seems to lead the readers into finding an answer as to why Hebrew writers alternately referenced their Arab neighbors either in religious terms, as Arabs, or as hyphenated Muslim- or Christian-Arabs. Ultimately, he does not give a definitive answer but rather notes that for the most part, Zionists had encountered Arabs in religious terms in texts. As part of this, the Zionist press readily characterized the Christian Arabs in more negative terms than the 'Ishmaelite' (Muslim) Arabs. This, as Gribetz argues throughout the rest of the book, was due to the Zionist perception that the Muslims shared a common race with the Semitic Jews. No parallel anti-Islamic polemic seemed to exist in the Hebrew press discourse as it did for Christians—whom Gribetz claims were not seen as 'fully Arab' by Palestine's Jewish Zionist elite. Zionists imagined that their non-Jewish counterparts acted in accordance to their religion: as Christians in Europe had developed an anti-Semitic treatment of Europe's Jews, so too would Palestine's Arab Christians.

As Gribetz shows, this racial-religious stereotyping went both ways. In analyzing Arab writers' emphasis on Muslim traditional coexistence with Jews, Gribetz alludes to recent work by Julia Phillips Cohen regarding the 'myth' of Ottoman tolerance for Sephardic Jews who settled in the Empire. Along the same lines, the success of European and some Sephardic Jews meant that more moderate Arab intellectuals argued that Jews could be role models for the Arabs if both communities were defined in racial terms, as cousins from the same race. Whilst the Arab intellectuals surveyed in the book mostly opposed Zionism in Palestine and went to great lengths to stress their positive acceptance of Judaism as a religion, the author further demonstrates that Muslim and Christian writers largely characterized the Jews—both European and Sephardic—as self-interested, greedy, and 'naturally' in pursuit of money. What did concern Arab writers, such as the editor of the periodical *al-Hilal*, was that 'Israelitism is simultaneously a religion and a nationality [*jinsiyya*], unlike Christianity and Islam.'

The first four chapters of the book conclude that Arab authors and newspaper editors seemed largely sympathetic to Jews, on account of their exile and diaspora, and neither Muslims nor Christians questioned the Zionist biblical claim to Palestine. The Arabs did, however, already contest the Zionist aim to possess Palestine. Very few textual sources and encounters by Arabs with Jews were outright or wholly anti-Zionist—rather, their views seemed contradictory as regards to arguments on the threats of modern Zionism. What is clear from Gribetz's sources is that Arab writers did express fear of the Jews' renewed interest in political sovereignty in Ottoman Palestine.

The final full chapter demonstrates that Zionist leaders hoped for the ‘conquest of the Arabic press’ in order to make the Arab Christian and Muslim periodicals more sympathetic to Zionist activities in Palestine. This chapter is most interesting in its analysis of how Arabic-speaking Zionists wrote about Judaism and Jewish history in Arabic for an Arab audience in the years shortly before 1914. Despite some of these works being largely apologetic, their Jewish writers framed Jewish history in nationalist terms in order to legitimize Zionism and to depict some aspects of Judaism as comparable to Islam. One Sephardi author, Nissim Malul, wrote little on race in his Arabic works on Judaism, and he insisted that religion never truly motivated Muslim or Christian opposition to Jews. Malul instead claimed—not unlike his Arab counterparts—that economics and the financial status of the Jews created communal divisions. Gribetz ends the chapter questioning his sources: in particular, did Zionist writers perhaps feel that tensions could be resolved if the anti-Zionist bloc believed that these divisions stemmed from economics, rather than religion?

The book itself offers very infrequent mention of the categorisations *beyond* race and religion that surely played a key role in the discourse of the Arab intellectuals since the *Nahda*, and, as most recently shown by Julia Phillips Cohen and Michelle Campos on the Sephardic side, of Ottoman subject-hood and *Osmanlilik*. The Arabic (plural) term for subjects, *ra'aya*, had Islamic overtones, as well as cultural ones, but Gribetz’s extensive research has not focused on the type of terminology that evolved into secular expressions of identity in late Ottoman Palestine. There is little discussion of the ‘Ottoman Zionist’ project among the Ladino-speaking Jewish community in the wider empire, let alone in Palestine, particularly as depicted in the Ladino and Hebrew press prior to the First World War. Cohen’s recent study of this community, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and its responses to the 1908 Young Turk Revolution in particular, offers good evidence that the discourse of race as an identification permeated the periodicals read by the empire’s literate Zionist and non-Zionist Jewish subjects and residents.

The link between ‘race’ and citizenship or nationality is not approached by Gribetz until the final pages of his book’s own conclusion, but this discussion is limited to the official (yet ambiguous) discourse on race in the immediate post-war years and as mentioned in the post-war treaties. A stronger focus on the textual encounters that linked race to a more definite and discursive secular identification would have been most welcome. Instead, the book historicizes (successfully, if in a limited manner) the perceptions of race as a category of classification as linked to religion, such as the Arabs’ and the Jews’ own emphasis that each was the cousin of the other because both came from the same ‘Semitic race’.